**Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC)**

## MINUTES for Monday, February 1, 2016

### SEAC – Representatives and (Alternates):

Association for Bright Children Diana Avon (Catherine Drillis)

Autism Society of Ontario – Toronto Lisa Kness (Ginny Pearce)

Brain Injury Society of Toronto Cynthia Sprigings

Community Living Toronto Clovis Grant (Margarita Isakov)

Down Syndrome Association of Toronto Richard Carter (Elaine Dodsworth-Lever)

Easter Seals Ontario Deborah Fletcher (Adebukola Adenowo-Akpan)

Epilepsy Toronto Steven Lynette (Sheelagh Hysenaj)

Learning Disabilities Association Toronto Mark Kovats

VIEWS for the Visually Impaired David Lepofsky

VOICE for Hearing Impaired Children Paul Cross

TDSB North East Community Aline Chan Jean-Paul Ngana

TDSB North West Community Phillip Sargent Jordan Glass

TDSB South East Community Olga Ingrahm Diane Montgomery (Dick Winters)

TDSB South West Community Nora Green Paula Boutis (Ken Stein)

TDSB Trustees Pamela Gough Alexander Brown Howard Kaplan

Regrets: Diana Avon, Clovis Grant, Steven Lynette, Phillip Sargent

Staff Present: Uton Robinson, Executive Superintendent, Special Education and Section Programs

Ian Allison, Coordinating Superintendent, Special Education and Section Programs

Dr. John Malloy, Director of Education, Toronto District School Board

Carla Kisko, Associate Director of Education, Finance and Operations

Christopher Usih, Associate Director of Education, Student Achievement, Well-Being and Employee Services

Recorder: Margo Ratsep, SEAC Liaison

## Call to Order and Declaration of Possible Conflicts of Interest

Chair David Lepofsky called the meeting to order at 7:02. No conflicts of interest were noted. He invited SEAC members and staff in attendance to introduce themselves to the guests in the gallery.

## Confirmation of Minutes for the January 11, 2015 SEAC meeting

David Lepofsky proposed amendments to the minutes. On motion of Jean-Paul Ngana, the Minutes of the January 11, 2016 SEAC meeting were adopted as amended so that:

* Under Item 5, terminology is corrected to read: “…, having already established a Twitter hashtag or search term, which is #TDSBSEAC”

* Acronyms such as HSP, IEP are spelled out
* Under Item 8 the first paragraph is amended to read: “SEAC chair David Lepofsky asked Uton Robinson to indicate when he would respond to the request for documents relating to SEAC Priority #1, in his December 5, 2015 email to Mr. Robinson. After a discussion, it was agreed that the SEAC chair and Mr. Robinson would meet to address this.”
* The text of a December 5, 2015 email from David Lepofsky to TDSB Officials Supporting SEAC is appended to the Minutes.

## Meeting the new TDSB Director of Education – Dr. John Malloy

## Dr Malloy thanked SEAC for the opportunity to attend the SEAC meeting. He emphasized his desire to hear from SEAC advice on what TDSB needs to be thinking about on a systemic level; looking at where to improve and paying attention to school level relationships and improved communication at the community level. He recognized the important contributions at tables such as SEAC in helping TDSB make decisions in policy formation. He found the agenda a helpful opportunity to listen and learn.

## David Lepofsky informed SEAC about the pre-meeting he had with Director Malloy to review SEAC priorities. He also emphasized the importance of permitting SEAC an opportunity to provide input before decisions are taken, especially about special education supports and how the board can strive to make education fully barrier free.

## Update on TDSB Inclusion Strategy

Executive Superintendent Uton Robinson had provided a slide presentation to SEAC members in advance of the meeting. He spoke briefly on the topic of inclusion and steps being taken, stressing that the move towards inclusion is continuous and on-going – an ideal to strive for rather than an end-point in itself. A You Tube video “Dear Teacher” was shown to illustrate messages to teachers from students about their special learning needs and what helps them to be more successful.

Chair David Lepofsky opened the floor to questions, including participation by members of the Inner City Advisory Committee. In response to questions, Executive Superintendent Uton Robinson and Coordinating Superintendent Ian Allison provided the following information, recorded in the minutes by general question topic:

1. Number of students involved in the current Inclusion-focused Review IPRCs

The Ministry of Education produced a report entitled, *How does learning happen? Ontario’s pedagogy for the early years.* In it, the authors state that:

All children benefit from being in inclusive environments where they are able to participate and collaborate in meaningful ways and form authentic, caring relationships… (MOE, 2014, p.25)

Last school year, one aspect of our inclusion strategy focused on the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) Review meetings for primary grade students (Grades 1 to 3) in intensive support programs (ISPs) for Behaviour, Learning Disability and Mild Intellectual Disability. It involved 420 students. This year’s focus is on Grades 4 to 8 and involves 1624 students. Review Identification Placement and Review Committee meetings take place annually. We will share the results of this year’s focus at the next SEAC meeting.

1. Demographics of students in Special Education

Research shows there is income and racial disparity with an over-representation in intensive support programs for some exceptionalities and under-representation in others. We have data that directs us to have a closer look at these situations to address the disparities. As examples:

* + For areas that have been underserved, we are ensuring there is greater access to secondary programs for students identified with Giftedness, through newly placed program sites.
  + TDSB has been using a nomination process for Giftedness that seems to be missing students in some of our communities. We will be introducing a new, more effective screening process for Giftedness across the system in Grade 3, to better identify students.
  + We are reviewing the placement of students in intensive support programs (ISPs) to ensure students are in their most enabling environment with the supports they need.
  + A focus is being given to the length of time students spend in intensive support programs.

They are not meant to be a destination but rather a timed tiered intervention.

1. Narrowing of academic pathways and opportunities for Special Education students

It is an apt analogy that rather than being a destination, special education is a journey that requires a known destination, careful documentation and appropriate measures of preparedness for returning to the main stream program. We recognize a need to do better describing the journey and explaining the points within it. Annual reviews are opportunities to talk about progress, pathways and transitions both formally and informally. SEAC has pointed out we need to articulate these more clearly, to provide clearer points of reference for students on the journey and their parents. We do need to communicate more clearly around program modification, ensuring everyone understands the outcomes related to the journey taken. We also want to keep an open mind regarding the trajectory and not put people in boxes – keeping options open.

1. Communication of the Special Education Plan and staff expectations

We are always focused on the consistent application of best practice across the system and use a variety of communication strategies to outline what best practice is, including face to face meetings. There has been less opportunity for these this year due to the labour issues that arose. As in all our messaging, Senior Team has regular access to principals, directly and by way of monthly meetings – although this year’s labour situation impacted on meetings. There are leadership team meetings with professional learning opportunities. There are also professional learning opportunities provided centrally. Our special education consultants are key in making sure the message goes through principals and special education staff in their schools. We have a goal to look at additional strategies to see if we can achieve greater gains in student achievement and well-being.

1. Tracking student success following program changes, class moves or closures

For the approximately 40 students who started or returned to their neighbourhood schools from a special education program, student success is monitored and tracked on an on-going basis at their school. We support more face-to-face meetings with parents and encourage parents not to waive the Identification Placement and Review Committee Reviews so that a full comprehensive picture of progress can be shared. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test results for students in special education are available and can be shared with SEAC.

While not specifically reviewed, research suggests that most of the students impacted by the closure of Language Lab programs have fared well compared to the challenges they faced in congregated programs.

1. Board Improvement Plan targets to reduce the number of students in congregated classes

The Board Improvement Plan (BIP) still includes previously established numerical targets for reducing the number of students in congregated special education programs and addressing the need to ensure that proportions represented in special education programs are more reflective of language and racial proportions of populations across the board. While still pursuing these goals, our focus remains on supporting students in the most enabling environment.

While the original Board Improvement Plan target to reduce the number of students in congregated programs by 50% has not changed, the data at this time from Identification Placement and Review Committee Review meetings, special education processes and our opening and closing of Intensive Support Program classes (ISPs), point to falling short of reaching the goal by 2017. With SEAC’s support, we will continue to investigate additional strategies to realize a move forward. Our administrators, teachers and support staff play a critical role in advancing inclusion.

Parental choice must also to be honoured. The Identification Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process gives parents the opportunity to express what they feel is more appropriate or best for their child, after hearing from a multidisciplinary team. We are being told by some parents that the mainstream classroom may not be the most enabling environment for their child. Many parents don’t want the relationships they have formed altered. We continue to respect parental preferences.

1. Disproportionate number of TDSB students in Special Education compared to other Ontario school boards

As was discussed at the Provincial SEAC Conference, TDSB does have proportionally more students in special education programs that other Ontario boards, in the range of 85% mainstreamed across Ontario as contrasted with only 50% mainstreamed in TDSB. The reasons for this are complex. We understand some families relocate to our jurisdiction because they have been told that they can access the resources their child needs in Toronto. We will continue to review the process by which students come to our congregated programs. We want to change the narrative that congregated setting is the only setting that provides needed supports. When looking at the composition of our congregated sites, we find that most of the students are male and there is a higher representation by racialized communities. We want to change this trajectory and continue to investigate and work in this area.

**Action:**

***SEAC would appreciate an update at a future meeting on why there is such a large difference between TDSB and the provincial average, once TDSB staff have had a chance to explore this and identify evidence-based reasons for this.***

1. Revised screening process for Giftedness

In terms of a new screening process for Giftedness, no process is perfect, but we also know that the current nomination process is flawed. We believe it will be a better process and that screening will be significantly better. Feedback from psychologists from other boards indicates a better accuracy rate and we will have better representation among areas currently missed.

1. Systemic influences on parental decisions around Inclusion

As we review policies and processes, we can look at how they might have unintended messages influencing a parent’s decision around congregated program placement or acting as disincentives for inclusion (such as perceived differences in access to supports in Speech and Language or Occupational Therapy or Physiotherapy (OT/PT).

Change is hard and even though greater inclusion may bring about greater achievement and a better sense of belonging, some people hold on to what they are comfortable with. Given evidence from research, we believe many students can achieve more success in the mainstream. Administrators who model inclusion through their leadership with staff promote opportunities for greater student success for all students.

1. Mainstream supports compared to Intensive Support Program

The availability of needed supports in the classroom is an important issue. Our aim is to ensure supports are equitable and that needs are appropriately met whether a student receives support in the main stream or in intensive support programs. The narrative for some is that that is not the case.

## 5. Potential Cuts to TDSB Special Education Staff – Uton Robinson

SEAC Chair David Lepofsky reported that he had heard from Executive Superintendent Robinson about a reduction of $3 million to the High Needs Amount Ministry special needs funding for the TDSB. He expressed concern that this kind of reduced funding could result in cuts to staff, and drew attention to a draft resolution in the February Chair’s Report. The resolution was then put forward as a motion:

**\*\*\*Motion – moved by South West Community Representative, Paula Boutis**

***The TDSB Special Education Advisory Committee recommends to the Toronto District School Board that:***

***1. In its budget for next year, the Toronto District School Board should not cut any positions of any staff who provide or directly supervise direct services to students with special needs, and***

***2. Before any cuts are contemplated to staff who provide or directly supervise direct service to students with special needs, the TDSB should first exhaust all other possible areas for budget reductions elsewhere within the TDSB, that address lower priority items than services to society’s vulnerable and disadvantaged children and youth, including thinning its layers of administrative bureaucracy, and***

***3. TDSB should publicly report on steps it has taken to avert or avoid the need to cut staff who provide or directly supervise services to students with special needs.***

During discussion, a question was raised as to whether it is realistically possible to find savings elsewhere in the TDSB budget.

Associate Director Carla Kisko responded, providing background on the Ministry funding cuts which began 3 years ago as part of the Ministry’s 4 year phase-in of a new formula-based funding model that reallocates the High Needs Amount (HNA) across the province. At the same time as cuts to HNA funding, TDSB has seen annual drops in enrolment of approximately 2000 per year in secondary and now in elementary too (approximately 500). This means an average loss in funding of approximately $11,000 per student. The estimated funding gap for 2016-2017 is approximately $12 million. Following multiple years of funding cuts, TDSB is under huge Capital expenditure pressures to address crumbling infrastructure, which has been absorbing the cuts.

When cuts are being considered, the Budget Committee looks first at all non-classroom areas. The very last area looked at is the classroom. As enrolment decreases, TDSB has to look at the number of schools operating, but this is hard to balance with a growing city without spreading resources too thin. We are trying to meet the challenge of cuts internally to protect classrooms and will be holding many community meetings to discuss the challenges (with 10 dates already posted on the TDSB website). She welcomed the opportunity to work with SEAC.

Discussion and SEAC input included the following:

* Recollection of a similar discussion 2 years ago in the first year of the new funding model. A letter was written to the Ministry to oppose the cuts, as well as the new formula-based (versus claims-based) funding model, but it appeared to have little effect.

Associate Director Kisko explained that the Ministry did respond to expressed concerns about resulting staff cuts with a reduction to the cuts by approximately $3 million and an intention to modify the program of cuts so that cuts would not be as great as they were in the first year.

* The difficulty for SEAC members continues to be describing the specific impacts of cuts on meeting student needs (as opposed to arguing about lost dollars).

Executive Superintendent Robinson explained that when the department goes through the staff allocation process, decisions about whether classes open, close or move are made based on meeting existing needs, making sure student needs are still met and that supports are still in place. Associate Director Kisko emphasized the board’s commitment to students of the system by trying to address cuts internally, looking at indirect services to protect classrooms and supports.

* Nowhere else can be overlooked before cuts are made to special education. The students represented by SEAC are the most disadvantaged, vulnerable and under-represented in the system, so they must be the last to face cuts.
* Find reductions in TDSB’s layers of middle management before turning to frontline staff who work with our children or their direct supervisors – such as use of in-house legal staff versus external lawyers who are more expensive. There are other kinds of legal costs, involving mediators, release of staff to attend hearings, Ontario Human Rights challenges and awards, etc. that SEAC does not know about.

Executive Superintendent Robinson clarified that legal costs are not applied to the special education budget.

* The proportion of cuts versus the overall TDSB budget wants clarification with respect to changes in the High Needs Amount (HNA) formula. The province was trying to increase overall equitability across the province. “Reallocation” needs clarification.

Associate Director Kisko explained that the High Needs Amount (HNA) formula used to be claims-based, which required a lot of paperwork. The ministry froze overall funding at that time. The province has not decreased its overall funding dollars – just re-distributed it by way of the new formula, which uses statistical analysis to predict what the high needs are in a board, rather than real numbers. TDSB numbers do not match the current allocation.

## SEAC used to receive a monthly Professional Support Services report outlining wait times for different services. SEAC members are hearing family stories where parents are being asked to keep kids at home because of insufficient staff. That is the kind of detail needed to argue TDSB cannot support cuts.

* Recognition for the fact that special education is one subsystem of the board and that cuts to other areas of the TDSB budget may impact on special education in ways that may not be easily identifiable or immediately understood.
* Concerned to hear discussion suggesting a message that TDSB can absorb these kinds of cuts with no impact on kids. One in 5 TDSB students is on an Individual Education Plan. We cannot give up any part of the support they require. The message needs to be: “This is what it costs…This is what it takes…No cuts should be made – full stop”. The board needs to be public in stating these cuts cannot happen and tell the Ministry so.
* Unless there is data that shows the percentage of decreased enrolment also decreases special education needs, High Needs Amount (HNA) cuts cannot be supported.
* Need to also protect funding that supports teacher professional learning. To be able to support an inclusive model, teachers need training in how to work with different exceptionalities. It is not being provided adequately in pre-service training yet is being expected when they start teaching in the classroom.

SEAC Chair David Lepofsky called for the vote on the motion. The motion carried with one abstention.

## 6. SEAC Parent Outreach Working Group Report and Discussion

TDSB staff has indicated goals they want to achieve but practice may look different on the ground. SEAC’s Parent Outreach Working Group held a telephone conference to propose ways to find out what is happening on the ground. They propose that SEAC conduct a survey so that people can tell their stories without identifying information and or fear of backlash. The survey could have both open-ended and close-ended questions to be filled out on line. Responses would be aggregated to identify trends. From the Chair’s discussion with Director Malloy, the Board has the technology to do it. The working group could propose content and ideas on how to spread the word to parents.

**\*\*\*Motion – moved by North West Community Representative Jordan Glass**

**That the board provides SEAC with the required support to survey parents on their concerns about special education.**

The motion carried.

## 7. Brainstorming Reforms on SEAC Priority 1

There was insufficient time for this item so it has been deferred to a future meeting.

## 8. SEAC Administrative issues

## Scheduling April 2016 SEAC meeting

The date for the April meeting was decided as Tuesday, April 5th.

## Application for SEAC South West Alternate Community Representative, deferred from January meeting

A question was raised about the need to increase the size of SEAC and the need to broaden the application search rather than accepting any uncontested applications. Preference was voiced that a working group be established to generate recommendations. The following members volunteered to join the working group: David Lepofsky, Richard Carter, and Jordan Glass.

SEAC Liaison Margo Ratsep clarified that the current make-up of SEAC is the result a board decision made several years ago, but that SEAC could review it and make recommendations to the board on this matter. The current application was in response to the vacancy posting on the SEAC pages of the TDSB website.

General consensus was reached to proceed with a recommendation:

***\*\*\*Motion moved by South West Community Representative Paula Boutis that:***

### *Whereas there are eight positions (2 per quadrant) for SEAC Community Representative and only two of the eight positions filled (one South East and One South West), and*

### *Whereas there is one vacancy for South West Community Alternate Representative on the Toronto District School Board Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), and*

### *Whereas Colin Ballosingh has applied for and meets board criteria for this vacancy, and no other applications have been received, therefore*

### *SEAC recommends that the Toronto District School Board appoint applicant Colin Ballosingh to the board’s Special Education Advisory Committee as a South West Community Alternate Representative for the term ending November 30, 2018.*

The motion carried unanimously.

## 9. New Business

## There was no new business

## 10. Adjournment – No member being opposed, the meeting adjourned at 9:03 p.m.

Next Meeting:March 7, 2016